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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CONAKRY 000172

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TAGS: PHUM PGOV SOCI GV

SUBJECT: ACUTE MALNUTRITION EVIDENT IN CONAKRY'S CENTRAL PRISON

REF: CONAKRY 0169

Classified By: POLOFF J. TULLY FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

¶1. (U) SUMMARY. During a recent Embassy visit to Conakry's central prison, a prison doctor confirmed that over a two month period, ten individuals had died of acute malnutrition in the jail. Severe crowding, inadequate medical care, and appalling hygienic conditions continue to imperil the fundamental human rights of the prisoners. Life-threatening conditions in Guinean prisons have been well-documented particularly by Doctors Without Borders in their February 2009 report, "No food or medicine here until you die." END SUMMARY.

TEN DEATHS FROM ACUTE MALNUTRITION

¶2. (U) Pol/Econ Chief and PolOff, accompanied by NGO ASWAR (Support for Refugees and Displaced Persons in Detention) Director Soraya Laghifiri visited Surete National, Conakry's central prison downtown on February 5. Laghifiri and the prison's medical doctor confirmed that over a period of two months, ten individuals had died of acute malnutrition at the jail. Officers observed at least ten male prisoners near the medical clinic who appeared to be extremely malnourished and in a skeletal state. Dozens of others were milling about the infirmary, severely emaciated with their clothes hanging off their bodies. Ragged pants hung so low on many of the men that their pubic area was exposed.

¶3. (C) The Director of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) delegation, Perrine Louart, confirmed the deaths in a meeting with PolOff on March 11, and estimated mortality at Surete at about 10% of the prison population. Louart stated that the death rate would be even higher but that it is fairly common for prisoners near death to be "released on humanitarian grounds" before they expire. Despite meals being provided three times a week by the Sisters of Charity and a supplemental feeding program administered by ICRC supporting the most vulnerable 240 prisoners, malnutrition remains a critical problem. Louart stated that food theft was part of the food distribution problem in Conakry's prison.

¶4. (U) On February 4, the kitchen area at Surete National contained three 50 kilo bags of rice to feed some 1000 inmates and guards that day. A small amount of meat donated by Saudi Arabia in honor of a religious holiday was being prepared, but it appeared to be only enough for possibly fifty people with small portions. Laghifiri noted that the presence of meat was a highly exceptional event. The kitchen was bare and held no other food of any kind. In order to prepare meals and purchase the oil, salt and ingredients for a basic sauce, a portion of the rice is usually sold. The Ministry of Justice supplies the rice but on some days no

food is delivered. For three days after the coup d'etat in late December, no food was reportedly delivered to the prison.

¶ 15. (U) The prison holds approximately 1000 inmates in a facility that was built for around 300. The Embassy last visited the prison on August 9, 2008. Previous visits revealed extremely crowded conditions, inadequate medical care and a lack of food (reftel). Conditions did not appear to have improved and on this visit officers observed adult male inmates sleeping on thin plastic mats with no bedding directly on the concrete floor. The doctor noted that due to inadequate hygienic conditions, rampant skin infections, particularly scabies, plague the prisoners. A separate cell was designated for inmates with tuberculosis (TB); however, prisoners with active TB were not isolated from those with suspected TB. During both the August 2008 and February 2009 visits, officers were able to speak to and question prisoners, guards, and the medical staff.

MORE WOMEN AND BABIES

¶ 16. (U) In contrast to previous visits, there appeared to be more female prisoners. Three had infants or toddlers with them while two inmates were reported to be pregnant. When questioned, one of the women said she had been arrested on marijuana charges, held at Camp Alpha Yaya military base for a couple of days, then transferred to Surete National. The female prisoner stated that she had not been mistreated at either facility.

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COMMENTS

¶ 17. (U) NGOs have been increasingly concerned over what appears to be rapidly deteriorating conditions in detention centers, especially with respect to food. According to charitable workers familiar with the prison, stigmatization, social mores and general poverty contribute to the problem of severe malnutrition. Impoverished Guinean families do not often have extra food to share with imprisoned family members and if separated by any distance, cannot afford to travel. Families are also reluctant to provide food or present themselves at the jail because of social stigma and for fear of entangling themselves in the web of prison bribes and extortion. The Ministry of Justice is responsible for providing food to the inmates; however, the Minister has lamented that his ministry is "broke." While it is recognized that the MOJ is one of the most underfunded ministries, Laghfiri claims the chronic neglect is due to a lack of political will. When funds are tight, the prisons tend to be the first to feel the pinch. END COMMENT.

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